

Message Text

PAGE 01 STATE 076882
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AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS IMMEDIATE
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN PRIORITY
AMEMBASSY JIDDA PRIORITY
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S E C R E T STATE 076882

EXDIS, FROM THE SECRETARY

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, LE, IS, SY, PLO

SUBJECT: SOUTH LEBANON SITUATION

1. THE SITUATION IN SOUTH LEBANON MAY HAVE ENTERED A NEW AND MORE RISKY STAGE. WHILE IT HAS NOT YET BEEN POSSIBLE TO CONFIRM THE REPORTS THAT SYRIAN UNITS HAVE ACTIVELY SUPPORTED PALESTINIAN FORCES THROUGH ARTILLERY SHELLING OF MARJA'UN OR THROUGH OTHER MEANS, IT APPEARS THAT THE SYRIANS HAVE AT THE LEAST ADOPTED A MORE PERMISSIVE STANCE VIS-A-SECRET

PAGE 02 STATE 076882

VIS MAINLINE FATAH EFFORTS. CONSIDERING THE MILITARY STRENGTH WHICH THESE MAINLINE PALESTINIAN FORCES COULD BRING TO BEAR AGAINST THE MARONITE FORCES IN SOUTH LEBANON, EVEN IN THE ABSENCE OF ACTIVE SYRIAN SUPPORT, THE MOST RECENT DEVELOPMENTS MAKE IT LIKELY THAT THE ISRAELIS WILL BECOME EVEN MORE INVOLVED IN SUPPORT OF THEIR CHRISTIAN ALLIES. WHILE THE ISRAELIS THIS TIME SEEM TO BE PLAYING SYRIAN INVOLVEMENT IN LOW KEY, AT LEAST FOR THE PRESENT, IT SEEMS PRUDENT THAT WE GET IN TOUCH WITH THE AUTHORITIES IN ISRAEL, LEBANON, AND SYRIA TO ASCERTAIN THEIR INTENTIONS,

TO EXPRESS OUR CONCERN OVER THE RECENT DIRECTION OF EVENTS,
TO COUNSEL CAUTION, AND TO SEE WHETHER A STANDSTILL
ARRANGEMENT OR TRUCE CAN BE ESTABLISHED IN ORDER TO PREVENT
A POSSIBLE CHAIN REACTION OF MILITARY MOVES AND COUNTER-
MOVES.

2. FOR CHARGE DUNNIGAN: PLEASE GET IN TOUCH WITH ALLON
OR EVRON TO MAKE THE FOLLOWING KEY POINTS:

-- THE ISRAELI ASSESSMENT OF THE SOUTHERN LEBANON SITUA-
TION (TEL AVIV 2244) WAS NOT AS HELPFUL FROM OUR POINT OF
VIEW AS WE HAD HOPED IT WOULD BE. WE HAD HOPED THAT A
FRANK EXCHANGE OF VIEWS WOULD HELP DETERMINE WHETHER RECENT
DEVELOPMENTS SERVED OUR MUTUAL INTERESTS AND THOSE OF A
UNIFIED LEBANON.

-- OUR VIEW HAS BEEN THAT THE CHRISTIAN MILITIAS HAVE BEEN
PRESSING WITH GREAT DETERMINATION THEIR EFFORTS TO
ESTABLISH A BUFFER ZONE ALONG THE ISRAELI BORDER EXTENDING
FROM MARJAOUN TO THE SEA. THEIR CHANCES OF SUCCESS IN
THIS ENDEAVOR SEEMED TO BE GOOD ONLY AS LONG AS THEY WERE
ENGAGING PRIMARILY IN FIGHTING THE REJECTIONIST PALES-
TINIANS AND THEIR LEBANESE LEFTIST ALLIES IN THE AREA. ANY
SERIOUS, PROTRACTED ENGAGEMENT AGAINST MAINLINE FATAH
FORCES, AND THE LATTER'S ALLIES, HAS ALL ALONG HELD GREAT
RISKS. BRINGING THE CONSIDERABLE MILITARY STRENGTH OF
SECRET

PAGE 03 STATE 076882

FATAH INTO THE FIGHTING ON A MAJOR SCALE COULD THREATEN
MUCH THAT THE CHRISTIANS HAVE ACHIEVED.

-- THERE IS EVIDENCE THAT MAJOR FATAH INVOLVEMENT HAS
BEGUN TO OCCUR. PLO SPOKESMEN, INCLUDING ARAFAT, HAVE
RECENTLY SPOKEN MORE OPENLY AND PUBLICLY ABOUT ISRAELI-
CHRISTIAN COOPERATION IN THE SOUTH, SIGNALLING A CHANGE
FROM THEIR RELATIVELY QUIESCENT STANCE OF THE PAST FOUR
MONTHS. HEAVIER MAINLINE PALESTINIAN INVOLVEMENT IN THE
FIGHTING OF THE PAST 48 HOURS MAY HAVE STEMMED FROM
PLO/FATAH APPREHENSION THAT THE CHRISTIANS WOULD NOT BE
CONTENT WITH ACHIEVING THE LIMITED OBJECTIVE OF A BUFFER
ZONE AND A CLEAN-UP OF THE REJECTIONISTS BUT WOULD INSTEAD
MOVE AT SOME FUTURE MOMENT TO CLEAN UP MILITARILY ALL
PALESTINIAN ELEMENTS SOUTH OF THE LITANI.

-- IT WAS PARTLY FOR THIS REASON THAT WE WANTED TO KNOW
WHAT THE ISRAELI ATTITUDE WOULD BE REGARDING THE POSSIBLY
MORE AMBITIOUS OBJECTIVES. THIS COULD HAVE AN IMPORTANT
BEARING ON THE STABILITY OF LEBANON, WHICH WE CONTINUE TO
BELIEVE IS IN THE COMMON INTEREST OF BOTH OUR COUNTRIES.

-- THE SYRIAN ROLE IN THE IMMEDIATE FUTURE COULD BE
CRITICAL. HOW TO REACT PUBLICLY TO THE OPEN COOPERATION

BETWEEN THE CHRISTIANS AND ISRAELIS HAS LONG BEEN A PROBLEM FOR THE SYRIANS, BUT THEY HAVE BEEN BEHAVING PRUDENTLY UP TO NOW AND HAD IN ESSENCE DECIDED NOT TO CHALLENGE THESE DEVELOPMENTS IN ANY SIGNIFICANT WAY. THE SYRIANS NOW MAY HAVE DECIDED THAT THE CHRISTIANS HAD

BEEN PRESSING TOO HARD. WE HAVE NO CONFIRMATION THAT THEY HAVE LENT TO THE PALESTINIANS ACTIVE MILITARY SUPPORT OF THE KIND REPORTED OVER THE PAST FEW DAYS BUT THEY MAY WELL HAVE ADOPTED A MORE "PERMISSIVE" ATTITUDE TOWARDS PALESTINIAN FORCES MOVING THROUGH THE AREAS THEY CONTROL. THEY MAY HAVE DECIDED IT IS IN THEIR INTEREST TO HELP STEM
SECRET

PAGE 04 STATE 076882

THE CHRISTIAN TIDE AND POSSIBLY REVERSE IT. ANOTHER POSSIBILITY IS THAT THEIR REAL OBJECTIVE IS TO ALLOW PRESSURE TO BE APPLIED AGAINST THE CHRISTIANS SO THAT THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT LEADERS SUCH AS CHAMOUN--AS WELL AS THE CHRISTIAN MILITIAS IN THE SOUTH--WILL ACCEPT SARKIS'S AUTHORITY AND COOPERATE WITH HIS OBJECTIVES. THIS WOULD BE CONSISTENT WITH SYRIAN SUPPORT FOR SARKIS AGAINST CHAMOUN IN THE FORMER'S SUCCESSFUL EFFORT TO APPOINT A NEW ARMY COMMANDER.

-- WE HAVE NOTED THE RESTRAINT WITH WHICH ISRAELIS HAVE RECEIVED RECENT REPORTS OF POSSIBLE SYRIAN SUPPORT FOR PALESTINIANS IN SOUTHERN LEBANON. WE BELIEVE IT IS IMPORTANT NOT TO JUMP TO CONCLUSIONS ABOUT THE PRESENT SYRIAN POSITION, WHICH WE ARE TRYING TO ASCERTAIN.

-- OUR BASIC POSITION IS TO SUPPORT THE SARKIS GOVERNMENT AND ENCOURAGE CONDITIONS WHEREBY FORCES SUBJECT TO HIS AUTHORITY CAN EVENTUALLY TAKE CONTROL THROUGHOUT SOUTHERN LEBANON. THIS DEVELOPMENT WILL REQUIRE TIME, BUT A STRONG CENTRAL AUTHORITY, EMBODIED IN THE LEGITIMATE LEBANESE GOVERNMENT, IN OUR VIEW, REPRESENTS THE ONLY PRACTICAL MEANS THROUGH WHICH LEBANON WILL REMAIN UNPARTITIONED AND A NON-CONFRONTATION STATE.

-- WE WOULD APPRECIATE THE ISRAELI VIEWS ON THE CURRENT SITUATION IN THE SOUTH. WE IN THE MEANWHILE WILL BE IN TOUCH WITH THE LEBANESE AND SYRIAN GOVERNMENTS ALSO TO COUNSEL PATIENCE AND CAUTION. WITH THE LEBANESE IN PARTICULAR, WE WILL TRY TO SEE WHETHER SOME KIND OF DE FACTO TRUCE COULD BE ESTABLISHED IN ORDER TO PREVENT A FURTHER DETERIORATION OF THE SITUATION.

3. FOR AMBASSADOR MURPHY: WE BELIEVE YOU NEED NOT WAIT UNTIL YOUR APPOINTMENT WITH ASAD TO MAKE THE FOLLOWING POINTS. KHADDAM, IF HE IS AVAILABLE, OR HIS DEPUTY, WOULD BE SUITABLE FOR YOUR APPROACH.

SECRET

PAGE 05 STATE 076882

-- WE HAVE BEEN CONCERNED BY THE SITUATION IN SOUTHERN LEBANON AND, IN RECENT WEEKS, HAVE BEEN CONSULTING REGULARLY WITH THE LEBANESE GOVERNMENT. WE HAVE ALSO BEEN IN TOUCH WITH THE ISRAELIS.

-- THE EVENTS OF THE PAST FEW DAYS IN SOUTHERN LEBANON ARE CAUSE FOR CONCERN. WHATEVER THE AGGRAVATIONS, THE RECENT HEAVY FIGHTING BETWEEN THE CHRISTIAN MILITIAS AND MAINLINE

PALESTINIAN FORCES NOT OF THE REJECTIONIST GROUPING HAS ADDED A NEW DIMENSION TO THE PROBLEM. SOME OF THE FIGHTING HAS BEEN CONCENTRATED IN AREAS EXTREMELY CLOSE TO THE ISRAELI BORDER. WE HAVE SEEN REPORTS THAT SYRIAN ELEMENTS OF THE ARAB SECURITY FORCE HAVE LENT ACTIVE MILITARY SUPPORT TO THE PALESTINIANS. WHATEVER TRUTH MAY BE BEHIND THESE REPORTS--AND WE WOULD APPRECIATE ANYTHING THE SYRIANS MAY CARE TO VOLUNTEER ABOUT THEM--THE IMPRESSION HAS BEEN CREATED THAT THE SYRIANS HAVE ADOPTED AN ACQUIESCENT OR MORE PERMISSIVE ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE MAINLINE PALESTINIAN ELEMENTS.

-- WE WOULD APPRECIATE THE SYRIAN ASSESSMENT OF THE SITUATION, PARTICULARLY THEIR ESTIMATE OF PALESTINIAN AND CHRISTIAN OBJECTIVES IN THE SOUTH.

-- AS THE SYRIANS WILL RECALL, WE HAVE CONSISTENTLY SUPPORTED THE CAUTIOUS AND CONSTRUCTIVE POLICIES PURSUED BY THE SYRIAN GOVERNMENT IN BRINGING AN END TO THE CIVIL CONFLICT AND IN REINFORCING THE AUTHORITY OF THE LEGITIMATE LEBANESE GOVERNMENT OF SARKIS. IN THIS CONNECTION, WE HAVE NOTED THAT SYRIA'S SUPPORT FOR SARKIS MAY HAVE ASSISTED HIM SIGNIFICANTLY WHEN HE APPOINTED A NEW COMMANDER OF THE LEBANESE MILITARY ESTABLISHMENT OVER THE OPPOSITION OF CERTAIN CHRISTIAN RIGHTIST ELEMENTS. THIS SEEMED TO US A SENSIBLE AND POSITIVE MOVE AND WE HOPE IT
SECRET

PAGE 06 STATE 076882

WILL IMPROVE THE PROSPECTS THAT A LEBANESE MILITARY FORCE CAPABLE OF ASSERTING AUTHORITY AND CONTROL IN THE SOUTH CAN NOW BE ESTABLISHED WITH A MINIMUM OF DELAYS.

-- WE HAVE BEEN CONSIDERING WHETHER THE SYRIANS ARE NOW FOLLOWING UP THAT POLICY OF SUPPORT FOR SARKIS BY MAKING CLEAR TO THE INDEPENDENT CHRISTIAN MILITIAS IN THE SOUTH THAT THEY SHOULD ACCEPT DIRECTIVES FROM THE BEIRUT GOVERNMENT. WE WOULD APPRECIATE SYRIA'S CLARIFICATION.

-- FOR OUR PART, WE WILL BE IN TOUCH WITH THE ISRAELIS AND THE SARKIS GOVERNMENT ABOUT THE SITUATION. WE WILL COUNSEL CAUTION, SINCE IT IS ESSENTIAL THAT A CHAIN

REACTION OF MILITARY MOVES AND COUNTER-MOVES NOT TAKE PLACE. THIS COULD LEAD TO WIDER CONFLICT AND CHECK THE PROGRESS OUR TWO GOVERNMENTS TOGETHER HAVE BEEN SEEKING TOWARDS A SETTLEMENT OF THE MAJOR LEBANESE AS WELL AS GENERAL MIDDLE EAST ISSUES.

-- OUR INITIAL VIEW IS THAT ALL SHOULD DO THEIR BEST TO ENCOURAGE THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A STANDSTILL OR DE FACTO TRUCE IN SOUTHERN LEBANON. SYRIA HAS GREAT INFLUENCE WITH ALL FACTIONS IN LEBANON AND COULD HELP MAKE IT POSSIBLE.

WE URGE SYRIAN CONSIDERATION OF SUCH A STEP.

4. FOR AMBASSADOR PARKER: WE PREFER THAT YOU NOT PROVIDE TO BOUTROS OR SARKIS THE GIST OF THE ISRAELI ASSESSMENT CONTAINED IN TEL AVIV 2244. FOLLOWING ARE THE PRINCIPAL POINTS YOU SHOULD MAKE TO EITHER MAN.

-- IN RESPONSE TO A REQUEST FROM BOUTROS, WE HAD BEEN IN TOUCH WITH THE ISRAELIS ABOUT THE SOUTHERN LEBANON SITUATION. WE WERE NOT WHOLLY SATISFIED WITH THE ISRAELI ANSWERS TO SOME OF OUR QUESTIONS AND WE HAD PLANNED TO BE BACK IN TOUCH, WHEN THE MOST RECENT OUTBURST OF FIGHTING
SECRET

PAGE 07 STATE 076882

TOOK PLACE. IN LIGHT OF THE POSSIBILITY THAT THE SYRIANS MAY HAVE ADOPTED A MORE PERMISSIVE STANCE TOWARDS THE MAINLINE PALESTINIAN ELEMENTS, WE WOULD APPRECIATE HEARING THE LEBANESE VIEW OF THE SITUATION.

-- WE ARE MEANWHILE GETTING IN TOUCH WITH THE ISRAELIS AND SYRIANS TO COUNSEL CAUTION, SINCE WE ARE CONCERNED THAT THE RISKS ARE GROWING THAT A CHAIN REACTION OF MILITARY MOVES AND COUNTER-MOVES MAY BE SPARKED OFF THROUGH MISCALCULATION. WE HAVE TAKEN NOTE OF LEBANESE APPREHENSIONS THAT THE SYRIANS WOULD SOONER OR LATER REACT TO MARONITE-ISRAELI COOPERATION ALONG THE BORDER. IF THE SYRIAN REACTION TAKES THE FORM OF ACTIVE MILITARY SUPPORT FOR THE PALESTINIANS FIGHTING THE CHRISTIANS, THIS WOULD OBVIOUSLY INCREASE THE DANGERS IN AN ALREADY RISKY SITUATION. WE HOPE THAT LEBANON ALSO WILL CAUTION THE SYRIANS AGAINST GOING TOO FAR.

-- WE WOULD BE INTERESTED IN WHETHER IT WOULD BE POSSIBLE TO ESTABLISH A STANDSTILL ARRANGEMENT ON THE GROUND OR SOME DE FACTO TRUCE. THIS MIGHT OFFER A BREATHING SPELL DURING WHICH THE LEBANESE GOVERNMENT MIGHT BE ABLE TO BRING THE INDEPENDENT CHRISTIAN MILITIAS TO ACCEPT THE GOVERNMENT'S AUTHORITY, POSSIBLY THROUGH THE NEW MILITARY COMMANDER, GENERAL KHOURY.

-- THE U.S. WANTS TO SUPPORT THE SARKIS GOVERNMENT IN ALL

APPROPRIATE WAYS, AND WE HOPE THAT IT WILL SOON BE POSSIBLE
TO ASSERT THE GOVERNMENT'S AUTHORITY THROUGHOUT SOUTHERN
LEBANON. THEREFORE, WOULD IT BE HELPFUL TO SARKIS IN THIS
CONNECTION FOR US TO BE IN TOUCH WITH THE CHRISTIAN
LEADERSHIP IN THE KFOUR FRONT TO URGE RESTRAINT AND FULL
COOPERATION WITH SARKIS AT THIS DANGEROUS JUNCTURE TO KEEP
CONFRONTATION IN SOUTH LEBANON FROM GETTING OUT OF HAND?

5. LATE AFTERNOON OF APRIL 5, ISRAELI EMBASSY INFORMED US
SECRET

PAGE 08 STATE 076882

IT HAD NO RPT NO CONFIRMATION OF DIRECT SYRIAN MILITARY

SUPPORT OF PALESTINIANS (E.G., SHELLING).
VANCE

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